1 The Criticism of Lawrence

Like all writers, Lawrence has been differently read at different times. While he was still writing, the books were received one by one, each adding to the public sense of what he was about. Each was new, and in some ways hard to grasp. Once he was dead, the public had to decide, with Lawrence as with other writers, what the whole work meant and whether it mattered. By now people were looking back over a number of years, and must have noticed that the first books already seemed different – because the others had been read since, and because they, his first readers, were older and the world had changed.

We now see that Lawrence is one of the writers who have helped the world to change – though not as much and not in the ways he wanted. That is to say, his readers have, from very early on, thought 'This man wants to change my way of seeing the world, and my life.' After an initial welcome, he was received with shock and opposition in his lifetime, and suffered for it. Since the world has changed, he does not now cause so much shock, but readers still feel his design on them, and many react in anger. It is one kind of tribute, to one of the few great writers with power to detain us at a deep level of personal involvement.

This was not yet clear in 1911, when *The White Peacock* was published. But Jessie Chambers (the original of Emily in *The White Peacock* and of Miriam in *Sons and Lovers*) had spent years growing up beside Lawrence, and loved him. When she sent some of his poems to the editor of 'The English Review' in 1909, it was out of the conviction that she was helping to establish a genius. When Catherine Carswell as reviewer came upon the first novels, she too perceived that this was no run-of-the-mill writer. Frieda Weekley, meeting one of her husband's pupils, and falling in love with him, knew that she was eloping to share the life of a genius. Aldous Huxley became a loyal friend, and to win the convinced and

lasting loyalty of that sceptical intelligence was to survive a real test. John Middleton Murry was a friend, of a sort, and convinced in his own way that Lawrence was a great man.

I have named the people who wrote the first substantial printed commentaries and memoirs. The stream of ephemeral and often unintelligent reviews which had greeted each of Lawrence's works was joined by a stream of books about him: so that his work was now being seen as a completed whole, by an author becoming a classic. His death in 1930 released this stream. The important first books are Murry's *Son of Woman*, 1931; Catherine Carswell's *Savage Pilgrimage* of 1932, which was partly a retort; Murry's *Reminiscences of D. H. Lawrence*, 1933, which was partly a riposte to Catherine Carswell, and Jessie Chambers's *D. H. Lawrence: A Personal Record* which was published under the pseudonym 'E.T.' in 1935, and was in places a reply to Murry's by now well-known diagnosis. Huxley's contribution was the important and admiring Introduction to the substantial volume of Lawrence's *Letters*, which he collected and edited in 1932. So, quickly after Lawrence's death there grew up a tradition of discussion about him: or rather, a controversy. This fierce argument to-and-fro was started by people who had known Lawrence as man, friend, and potential leader. It was conducted against the general background of slowly forming public opinion about Lawrence's nature as a writer, and helped to shape it.

His first novel and the first stories were well-received. There were people generously willing to recognise a new talent. Some thought, on the basis of the early stories and *Sons and Lovers*, that he was going to be the great working-class writer that the newly enfranchised and literate industrial population ought to produce. That hope soon faded. *Sons and Lovers*, reduced to a classic exposition of the so-called Oedipus Complex, offered others the hope that Lawrence would be the novelist of the newly discovered science of the mind. But Lawrence knew that his insights were deeper and broader than Freud's. Novels cannot be reductive in the way that theory must be. Another significance was that from the beginning there was great frankness in Lawrence's treatment of sexuality; the relations between men and women were his central concern,[1] and there was no way of avoiding the treatment of sexuality. He was bound to react against and suffer from the late-Victorian prudishness which insisted that sex was not a topic for open discussion. It is hard for anyone not born in that era or

brought up by parents born in it even to conceive how many things might not then be said. One early reader of *Sons and Lovers* thought it was the dirtiest book he had read; yet he was a publisher, and might have been expected to be sophisticated. So, from the first, with *The White Peacock*, Lawrence had censorship trouble: the tale of Annable and his Lady Chrystabel was too rawly told for publishers anxious about the circulating library sale.

Unconventional or thoughtful people would thus see Lawrence as the standard-bearer of a necessary frankness. This seemed to link him with a progressiveness which he actually despised, and it was a shock to many to discover that Lawrence, who *ought* to be progressive, wasn't. The confusion lasted until after the legal case which made it possible for ordinary people to read the unbowdlerised original version of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. That book, along with Joyce's *Ulysses*, was for years a rallying-point for people who were against censorship; and because of its nature Lawrence seemed the apostle, even the martyr, of a general liberalism (later called permissiveness) which he was against.

But Lawrence was the man who made it possible for others after him to describe sexual acts using the vernacular words. It has to be accepted as a liberation, of an equivocal kind. In the 1930s F. R. Leavis, writing his first brief study of Lawrence, was convinced that *Lady Chatterley's Lover* was the greatest of the works: partly because he applauded the 'hygienic' effect of using ordinary language to describe sexuality, partly because in that book Leavis could identify the linked themes of the industrial wasteland we live in and the personal lives thwarted by that blight. Yet Leavis lived to deplore the lawsuit against Penguin Books, since he could neither wish the prosecution to succeed nor support the terms in which the book was defended.

Since that case, sexual explicitness in fiction, sanctioned by Lawrence's example, has become a routine exercise, a cliché, or the exploitation of a lingering wish to be titillated. But Lawrence also begins to seem different again. Since it is now realised that he is not progressive, it has been a shock to some who wanted him as an ally to find how anti-progressive he is. He is not liked by feminists either, for good reasons. Those who admire him as the greatest English novelist of the century now see the sexual theme as only an aspect – though a central one – of something wider: a concept of personal development or fulfilment. That too is become

an enlightened orthodoxy: part of the transvaluation of values or the rethinking of morality started by Nietzsche. In this area the central discussion of Lawrence as thinker or moralist must now be conducted, though it begs the question of the relationship between his thought and his art.

This evolution of the world's view of Lawrence – the history of his reception in its broadest terms – has been conditioned by the sharp debate about Lawrence's value and status mentioned above. Murry's *Son of Woman* was the book which dictated the original terms of this discussion. This is partly because Murry was endorsed by T. S. Eliot, who without having read much of Lawrence knew that he was against him, and welcomed Murry as having virtually disposed of him. Since Eliot was the most influential critic in England in the 1930s and 1940s, this position-taking, in *After Strange Gods* (1934) and elsewhere, was important, and meant that much discussion of Lawrence became apologetic or over-defensive. It was not until Lawrence was defended by Leavis, who took Eliot's place as the most influential critical voice in England in the 1950s and 1960s, that a convinced case *for* Lawrence was elaborated; and Leavis arguing against Eliot was arguing through him against Murry. But over the years he also changed the ground of his own championship of Lawrence.

Murry's case is not easy to summarise, because in places he is taking up his own stance against Lawrence as rival prophet, and the terms of his prophecy are as personal as any that he found in Lawrence. But briefly, he thought that Lawrence was born to be a religious leader, so that it does not matter that his writings are not 'art'. 'Art', we guess, has to do with the perfection of a form from which the artist has evacuated himself, leaving an exquisite and carefully-crafted structure which may be contemplated from an exclusively aesthetic point of view. Certainly Lawrence is not like that: his writings are always about life, and Lawrence himself is often present, sometimes obtrusively. Murry concedes the lack of art with such speed because he is interested in what he wanted to find instead: the scriptural writings left by the prophet of a new and personal religion. He thought that Lawrence was born to lead, though he led nowhere; he was born to love, though his love was tragically deflected; he was born to suffer, and so can by a rapid and frequent process of Murry's thought be seen as a Christ-figure. He was crucified on the cross formed by the intersection of his mission as Murry saw it, which was to love all

mankind, and his own understanding of that mission, which was to introduce a new understanding of the sexual relationship – that is, to love women. But this was a doomed enterprise, since Lawrence was a 'case'. His self-revelation, in *Sons and Lovers* and elsewhere, is of a man whose mothering had made him fatally unable to love any woman sexually. This deflected him into the search for a virility which he could find only in a succession of fictional male alter egos with whom he could imagine a quasi-homosexual relationship; and the progression of the case led him into horrible imaginings in which the virile male brothers become adepts of human sacrifice and the loved women are required to be so abjectly submissive that they finally abjure their own sexuality.

Murry's case is in many respects very shrewd, and never less than plausible. It was based on personal knowledge of Lawrence, and what was for its time a wide and deep knowledge of the writings. It is full of acute insights into the books which even Lawrence's admirers must accept. If Lawrence was cast as a demonic Christ, who had to be forgiven because he knew not what he did, it was clear to others (including Lawrence) what part Murry played: he was Judas, who betrayed with a kiss. Catherine Carswell's *Savage Pilgrimage* was an immediate attempt at a counter-statement. It had some sting in it, and Murry had the first edition suppressed, and responded with his own further *Reminiscences*. *Savage Pilgrimage* was a straightforward brief biography animated by the desire to present Lawrence as normal – perhaps 'representative' is the better word; as a sympathetic human being; as an artist. These things are done mostly by implication. A sense of Lawrence's charm and greatness emerges, and a sense of his importance, but there is no sustained attempt to suggest the ways in which Lawrence was a great writer: there could not be at this stage. People felt, or had an inkling of, what they could not yet get into words.

But Murry could only be answered adequately by someone who would support the claim that Lawrence was a great literary artist. The assertion was finally made by F. R. Leavis, and widely accepted as true, though it was not demonstrated in convincing detail, in his first full-length book on Lawrence, *D. H. Lawrence: Novelist*.[2] The title asserts that Lawrence is important not as prophet, but as a writer of major works of fiction.

Leavis also claimed that Lawrence is the modern continuator of

the 'Great Tradition' of the English novel – a claim which was hard in 1955 to understand. The difficulty can be explained in this way. Leavis's Great Tradition originally consisted of Jane Austen, George Eliot, Henry James, Joseph Conrad, and nobody else. These novelists were preeminent because they were centrally concerned with the moral difficulties of socially engaged individual consciences. Their characters are people trying to find their way and to make their choices in a life which continually faces them with problems of conduct, and where one of the main problems is how to judge the character and conduct of others. It is a tradition of strenuous moral discrimination by persons who are confirming their own nature in the struggle.

The fundamental reason why in 1955 it was hard to relate Lawrence to this tradition is that Lawrence quickly seems to thoughtful readers to have dropped the old moral tradition overboard: indeed to be against it. Jane Austen, for instance, whom he once called a 'narrow-gutted spinster', dramatises a social and moral world in which Lawrence's own ethos is at best 'sensibility', and at worst evil conduct. The contrast can be seen encapsulated in a single sentence in a letter from Lawrence to Louie Burrows of 12 April 1911: 'I say, only that is wicked which is a violation of one's feeling and instinct' – one's own feeling and instinct, not that of others. Jane Austen's characters act from principles which they receive from moral authority, though it is true that she shows, in Emma Woodhouse, that unless you learn for yourself the need for these things and their truth they are a dead letter, and that learning may mean growing, and that is painful. This is going on in an active verbalising component of the self which seems to live well above the midriff – indeed, up in the head. If in the end Mr Darcy proves to be a truly lovable person, then it becomes a pleasant duty to love Mr Darcy. Whether he is a sexual being as well as an estimable person is not to be dealt with in the pages of a book. Dickens drew nearer to these matters, but was not at first in the Great Tradition either. George Eliot and James indicated that sexuality was a moral vortex; but they remained at the outer ripples; and by and large their place in the tradition too has to do with conscious ethical strenuousness in the mature social being, where change is a matter of being convinced of the need to change, as a moral imperative.

Leavis had therefore either to accept the hiatus between Lawrence and these others, or to bridge it. Discovering the bridge

was an important part of his endeavour, producing a coherence in his account of the English novel. But it took him many years.

He was born in 1895, only ten years after Lawrence, and was of an age to read Lawrence's works as they were published. He came on the first poems and stories in the 'English Review' before the 1914–18 war, and was reminded of them after it, when, shocked and intellectually dislocated like most of the survivors, he set about rebuilding an intellectual life in the 1920s. For him Lawrence became one of the clues in that chaos: T. S. Eliot was the other. Leavis wrote about these two as the most important writers in English of their age, which is still our age. His first writing about Lawrence appeared in 1930, but while it asserted Lawrence's importance, it did not assert Leavis's own understanding. It was nearly twenty years before he thought he was beginning to understand Lawrence: the important essays began to appear in *Scrutiny* in 1949, and were collected in the first book in 1955.

Leavis's indirect retort to Murry, and his explicit rebuke to Eliot, who had too readily accepted Murry's account as serving his own purpose, was to the effect that Lawrence *was* a great artist. But it was an equivocal reply. Leavis produced from the whole range of Lawrence's work a small canon of works of major art: specifically *The Rainbow*, *Women in Love*, 'St Mawr', and a few others among the longer tales such as 'Daughters of the Vicar' and 'The Captain's Doll'. Other books were commended in passing; but implicitly *Sons and Lovers* was ignored as good but not needing to have anything said about it. Leavis is very dogmatic in this book; he insists that Lawrence is great, and that he is an artist, and the reader gathers that he is so largely because he was deeply involved in, and tragically aware of, the state of modern industrial and urban civilisation.

This was Leavis's own concern. He was anti-Marxist, but had a radical hatred of the dehumanising aspects of modern life: it was as if he was against the means of production, whoever owned them. He felt that an important writer was not alive to his time if he ignored this dehumanisation; it was plain to him that in *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love* Lawrence gave a panoramic survey of English society which was a diagnosis of disease; and so he was predisposed to find these books great. But they are said to be great mostly by asserting that they are about modern society – which is not the same as showing that they have finely performed their

function as novels, and may in any case be a distortion of emphasis. Leavis's preoccupations tended to make him slight the other novels; he felt he could admit, without paying it much attention, that a great deal of Lawrence's writing is flawed. He did explicitly criticise *The Plumed Serpent* at length, because Lawrence once said that he thought it the best thing he had done.

There is more than an underthought about Lawrence in the Leavises' book about Dickens, with its closely similar title, *Dickens the Novelist* (1970). For one thing, it seems that Leavis was aware of the need to explain the fundamental difference, or establish a fundamental link, between the writers of his Great Tradition and Lawrence. For Lawrence had a totally different view of the nature and growth of the individual human consciousness, the living being which is making its way in the world; he also had a challengingly different moral outlook; at this very fundamental level his art begins, and that is why it comes out perplexingly different. This was another reason why people brought up in the old tradition couldn't see him as an artist. In *Dickens the Novelist* Leavis bridged the gap by proposing a complementary moral and artistic tradition which runs from Blake through Dickens to Lawrence, and which is a valuable corrective to the Great Tradition of puritan moralism. The essential affinity between these three writers, far removed in time and not obviously linked, is a concept of the self not as a finished thing in a shell of selfhood, but as a growing identity which has to fulfil its own nature or be essentially frustrated. That is, the whole person has its needs; and these must be fulfilled, or development is thwarted.

This casts a retrospective light on the novelists of Leavis's Great Tradition. It was the tradition of the fine individual consciousness, a descendant of the old puritan conscience, the central Protestant thread in the Anglo-Saxon moral inheritance. Conscience is an active controlling force, typically thought of as in the soul or in the head, and linked to consciousness itself. It requires self-knowledge, and it insists on self-control or, if possible, self-transcendence. It tends heroically to say 'no, I must not', and to say it to the impulses which might claim to be needs. It tends to split the person into two parts: one is a conscience, a mind, and it controls the urges of the other – whether it is called the heart, the flesh, the body, or the instinctive impulses of the self. Naturally that includes the sexual impulses, automatically labelled 'lower' than the spiritual ones. Characteristically, the

growth of conscience means learning to say 'no' to the mere self. Or, to put it more positively, moral identities are created and confirmed which have the strength to say that necessary no, in tribute to something which transcends the self, and is a social ideal recreated as a personal moral ideal.

The limitation in this tradition, the inherent potential morbidity, is seen in Henry James, where the beauty of saying no to oneself sometimes seems to be indulged at the expense of better things than those that are affirmed; and where the heroes and heroines are always making spiritual widows and widowers of themselves, and retreating into a safe sanctified niche with a satisfied conscience. The notion of the fineness of consciousness becomes so rarefied that the multiplying moral issues can, to a robust moral sense, begin to seem trivial, in the way, and often an excuse for doing nothing with a good grace. Contrad in his *Victory* gives warning of something similar: the central figure Axel Heyst, a fine conscience arrested in self-scrutiny, has become morally paralysed, and is scarcely able, for lack of the necessary coarseness and self-assertiveness, either to assent to simple love or to resist the crudest evil.

Blake proposed as a vital principle the spontaneity which can say yes to the life that Heyst learnt too late to say yes to. Sexuality is a main constituent of that life. Leavis saw Dickens – or one aspect of Dickens – as link between Blake and Lawrence. He suggested that Dickens's language is not just exuberance, but a constant tribute to its own origin: Dickens's sense of life, itself creative and creatively perceived, and strongly set towards the positives that Blake and Lawrence celebrated, and against the personal and social blights they both hated. Class-pride and money-pride are the most obvious, as barriers to open dealing with other whole personalities; but Dickens also showed with great depth of understanding and subtlety how these social attitudes are linked to corruptions of puritan strengths. The ego which congratulates itself on being part of a social elect, and reprobates those who are outside that group, is not just displaying a tribalism disguised as righteousness; within the tribe it will exert a dominating will on younger or weaker members, to form them as members of the elect. The asceticism will bear heavily on sexual self-expression. At the deepest level one is in contact with an exertion of the will, of conscious or unconscious grapplings, parasitism, underminings, dominance. The moral universe that

Dickens displays would be terrifying to the point of suicide if it were not also eruptively animated by counterforces which stand for life: a word which has born a heavy load in the discussion of Lawrence.

Reading Lawrence taught Leavis to go back and revalue Dickens. In the process, Blake's terms 'selfhood' and 'identity' were adopted, appropriated and given an extended programmatic sense. The self represses, but the identity responds to the 'creative flow from below'. The concept became important for Leavis, and is borrowed from Lawrence: it comes from 'Love was once a little boy':

> The individual is like a deep pool, or tarn, in the mountains, fed from beneath by unseen springs, and having no obvious inlet or outlet. The springs which feed the individual at the depths are sources of power, power from the unknown.[3]

The identity which is fed in that way feels responsibility to something other than itself. This is also derived from Lawrence, and the chief locus is the moment in *The Rainbow* when Tom Brangwen is alone outdoors at night in lambing-time and looks up at the sky and knows 'he did not belong to himself'.

'. . . Love was once a little boy' only became available in England when Secker reprinted *Reflections on the Death of a Porcupine* in 1934 in the New Adelphi library. Perhaps Leavis read it then. But the book soon went out of print, and it was not until 1968 that Warren Roberts and Harry T. Moore brought out *Phoenix II*, in which the piece was for the first time made widely and permanently available. It is important now to remember that some of Lawrence's more important 'doctrinal' writings appeared in ephemeral publications and were unnoticed at the time; and some remained uncollected or hard to find until the late 1960s, so they were not in any real sense available until then. When they were, they helped – as they helped Leavis – to get the discussion of Lawrence away from the terms proposed by Murry.

We can see this process continued in Leavis's second book about Lawrence, *Thought, Words and Creativity*, published in 1976, Leavis's 81st year. The same basic critical judgements are proposed, so that Leavis's canon of the 'great' Lawrence is unchanged. But the grounds of the argument are different: or